

Introduction to Tantric Buddhism

General Introduction

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION. A whole new story. Can we get a comprehensive view? What are our sources? Terminology problems. External history through paradigm shifts. Insiders' narrative. Short introductions to literary expressions and technologies of tantric practice.

Introduction

The *bodhisattva* (T. *byang chub sems dpa'*) Sarvārthasiddhi (ie Siddhārtha) was meditating under the *bodhi* tree. We all think we know the story goes, but a seventh-century text continues thus: try as he may, he could not reach his ultimate goal, becoming a perfect *buddha* (T. *sangs rgyas*). Then all the transcendent *buddhas* (*tathāgata*, T. *de bzhin gshegs pa*) gathered and manifested themselves to him, pointing out that by austerities and without knowledge of the principles of all *tathāgatas* his efforts will be in vain. The *bodhisattva* then asked to be instructed, whereby he was introduced to a practice involving visualisations and *mantras* (T. *gsang sngags*). He also underwent a ritual process we may call initiation (*abhiṣeka*, T. *dbang bskur*). It was only then that he finally fulfilled his quest.

This daringly novel account marks the coming of age of a new style of Buddhism. Although by this time rituals involving *mantras*, increasingly complicated visualisations, even initiation, have been around for at least six centuries,¹ it was never clearly articulated that anything beyond the promised worldly goals can be achieved by them. However, beginning with the scripture we have referred to above, the *Sarva-tathāgata-tattva-saṅgraha* ('The Compendium of Principles of All Tathāgatas', T. *De bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi de kho na nyid bsduṣ pa*), and possibly even slightly earlier, a whole new array of teachings—under crucial influence from Śaivism²—begins to consolidate and gain confidence.

¹ Strauch, Strickmann, etc.

² Sanderson (70-243)

Comprehensive view?

It is very difficult to group these teachings in a coherent system,³ but the overall message seems to be this: there is a way which promises *both* the achievement of thisworldly goals and the ultimate aim. This way is easier, quicker, more varied, but accessible only to the

³ Most concise and lucid introduction for newcomers is still Tribe. For a more in-depth study with special reference to Śaiva antecedents see Sanderson. Recent(ish) monographs on the subject include the works of Davidson, Samuel (*The Origins of Yoga and Tantra*), and Wedemeyer, all to be treated with caution. Snellgrove's survey (117-303) is still quite remarkable but in need of thorough revision.

initiated, and (still) requires dedicated auto-soteriological practice.

This latter is a crucial distinguishing feature from Siddhānta Śaivism, which promises liberation upon death provided that everything went well during initiation; one of the otherwise very few elements Buddhism could not digest.⁴

⁴ *yuṣmābhir eva kartavyam
upadeṣṭā tathāgataḥ* |

Most apparent defining mark is ritualism (both visible and internal),⁵ the main elements being: pantheons (*maṇḍala*, T. *dkyil 'khor*) of baroque richness, the employ of magic spells (*vidyā* [T. *rig sngags*], *dhāraṇī* [T. *gzungs*], [non-Vedic] *mantra*), and a style of meditation that places strong emphasis on the eidetic visualisation of static and dynamic images (*bhāvanā*, T. *bsgom pa*), a 'tantric virtual reality'. Initiation (*abhiṣeka*), itself a highly elaborate ritual, is to be conferred by a qualified master (*guru* [T. *bla ma*], *ācārya* [T. *slob dpon*]), to whom the initiate (*śiṣya* [T. *slob ma*]) owes unequivocal fealty. The initiates form a semi-secret community, their primary identity. The wide variety of doctrines and practices based on these shared principles is usually referred to as tantric Buddhism.

⁵ Notwithstanding that ultimately ritual is condemned; on this later.

Sources

In spite of its popularity and importance, the development and career of tantric Buddhism on the Indian subcontinent, its literature, practices, doctrines, social causes and effects are still among the least understood areas of Asian history.

At the time of the decline of Buddhism in South Asia from the beginning of the thirteenth century onwards, it was arguably the dominant form of the religion. Except for a small but all the more important pocket in Nepal (the often unjustly neglected Buddhist Newars), and discounting the Tibetan diaspora, esoteric Buddhism has disappeared from the South Asian mainland. However, during its classical career of almost a millennium it was very successful in China, Korea, Japan, the Tarim Basin, the Tangut Empire, and in South East Asia. In Tibet proper, the Tibetan diaspora, Bhutan, Japan, and among the Mongols it continues to be a defining cultural force. It is also successful in the modern Western world, mostly through Tibetan transmission, and there are an increasing number of converts from East Asian countries. Besides the stronghold of Nepal, the most significant areas where tantric Buddhism flourished was East India (the present federal states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha in the Republic of India and the People's Republic of Bangladesh), Kashmir (now part of Jammu & Kashmir and contested territories), the Konkan coast (now mostly maritime Karnataka), parts of Tamil Nadu, and Sri Lanka. Here we concentrate on the history of tantric Buddhism in South Asia after *ca.* 700 CE and before *ca.* 1200 CE.

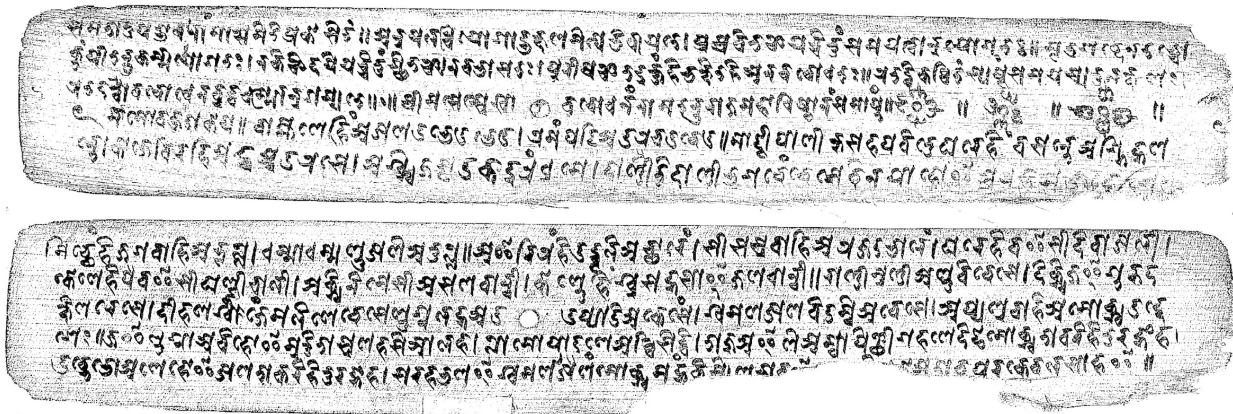
One of the primary reasons for this is the lack of reliably edited textual material, although raw material for such undertakings is

available in embarrassing abundance. The estimated number of titles in the original language (*ie* mostly [various registers of] Sanskrit) is about two thousand.⁶ This already rather sizable number is still merely a part of what must have been the Indic tantric Buddhist corpus: further hundreds of translated texts the originals of which have been lost can be found, primarily in the Chinese and Tibetan canons. We must add to all this the not insignificant corpus of apocrypha: texts that were written or compiled outside of South Asia proper, but based on Indic models and claiming the authority of an Indic original. Furthermore, many texts did not survive at all; the existence of these is inferred from quotations and references.

Fortunately, this situation regarding sources and scholarly reflection on them is changing rapidly in our days. In the last three decades a good number of editions and studies, a few of them excellent, have come out, primarily based on the manuscript material conserved in Nepal.

⁶ So Isaacson.

Figure 1: microfilm scan of a multiple-text manuscript, Tōkyō University Library no. 517. Palm leaf, undated, incomplete. Online at <http://utlsktms.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp>



The favourable climate of the Kathmandu Valley and Newar Buddhist communities are responsible for the bulk of (not only) tantric Buddhist texts that we may study today. Perhaps the largest collection is now in the National Archives, Kathmandu.⁷ The Kaiser Library, Kathmandu⁸ also holds a precious selection of esoteric Buddhist texts. Many manuscripts are still held in private possession, most of these are available in microfilm reproductions by the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project⁹ and the now defunct Institute for the Advanced Study of World Religions¹⁰. Outside Nepal, the most important repositories are the Asiatic Society of Bengal (Calcutta),¹¹ the Oriental Institute (Baroda), the Tōkyō University Library,¹² the Kyōto University Library, the Buddhist Library (Nagoya), the Cambridge University Library,¹³ the Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek (Göttingen),¹⁴ the Institut d'Études Indiennes at the Collège de France (Paris), the Royal Asiatic Society (London),¹⁵ and others.

⁷ NAK

⁸ KL

⁹ NGMPP/NGMCP

¹⁰ IASWR

¹¹ ASB

¹² TUL

¹³ CUL

¹⁴ NSUG

¹⁵ RAS

A significant (and, as I believe the authors would gladly agree, fortunately outdated) effort to list all such manuscripts is by Tsukamoto, Matsunaga, and Isoda (61-501).¹⁶

¹⁶ BBK

One of the last great unexplored corpora of manuscripts is held in various institutions in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Beijing, but these are accessible only with great difficulty, if at all.

A significant point to keep in mind is that an overwhelming part of these MSS are in terrible shape when it comes to the readings. It is considered a pious activity to copy such MSS; unfortunately, the principle does not say that you have to copy them *correctly* to obtain merit (*puṇya*, T. *bsod nams*); thus a source of unending frustrations and wonderful triumphs for the philologist-textual critic. Indic MSS never really had a good name to begin with, cf. Al-Bīrūnī's¹⁷ note:

¹⁷ Sachau, I:18

Add to this that the Indian scribes are careless, and do not take pains to produce correct and well-collated copies. In consequence, the highest results of the author's mental development are lost by their negligence, and his book becomes already in the first or second copy so full of faults, that the text appears as something entirely new, which neither a scholar nor one familiar with the subject, whether Hindu or Muslim, could any longer understand.

In spite of these momentous efforts, even some of the basic questions surrounding tantric Buddhism are still debated.

Terminology

To begin with, it is not entirely clear what we mean by "tantric" Buddhism. I have given a short polythetic definition to work with just above. But our problems do not stop here; in some ways, it is actually a problem we created for ourselves by the indiscriminate usage of the word *tantra* (now also an energy drink!).

The 'tribal' substrate?

There has been a long-standing view, which is still influential in some quarters, that there was some kind of "tantrism", which is usually identified as the beliefs and practices of a "tribal" substrate without doctrinal identity or affinity. According to this model, Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, Jainism, and Buddhism were somehow influenced by this substrate and hence the "tantric" form of these religions. Although it cannot be considered implausible that some tantric practices did indeed have tribal precedents (whatever 'tribal' means), the existence and substance of such a substrate cannot be proven decisively. Illiterate 'tribals' by definition sustained the bad habit of not writing down anything; but if we extrapolate from current—even

early modern—conditions, how can we be sure that ‘tribals’ of now are the same as the ‘tribals’ 1,500 years ago; are ‘tribals’ somehow impervious to change?¹⁸ It is much more plausible—and for this there is an abundance of evidence (see Sanderson) —, that doctrines and practices now identified as “tantric” first appeared in Śaivism, and only later on, as a result of religious competition, in Buddhism and so forth.

‘Tantra’ is what ‘tantra’ does?

There is another, somewhat more restrictive interpretation of “tantric”, namely that which follows the doctrines and practices taught in the *tantras* (ie “scriptures”, “books”, T. *rgyud*).¹⁹ The problem with this, and this is especially true for Buddhism, that texts that are normally considered “tantric” do not necessarily bear this name. Indeed, it is only from circa the eighth century onwards that we start having Buddhist *tantras*. The scriptures before this, which are nevertheless considered to contain “tantric” material, are called “spells” (*dhāraṇī*), “ritual” (*kalpa*, T. *rtog pa*), or very often simply *sūtra* (T. *mdo*).²⁰

Therefore, the words “tantrism” and “tantric” are to be used with caution, all the more so since their use has become quite entrenched.

Or esoteric?

Perhaps it is more appropriate to speak of “esoteric” Buddhism, since this particular kind of Buddhism is indeed based on mysteries, first and foremost on the mystery of initiation. However, this is applicable only for later, mature esoteric Buddhism, where initiation becomes an indispensable prerequisite for religious practice and thus, indirectly, liberation. However, if we interpret “esoteric” as teachings for a few chosen ones, another difficulty arises: we would thus again exclude earlier texts, where there is nothing about initiation or secret transmission, nevertheless, traditional doxography considers these texts as parts of the “esoteric” canon.

Hence it is only with these provisos in mind that we speak more or less interchangeably of “tantric” and “esoteric” Buddhism. I will fine-tune this a bit later on.

How different a way?

The terminological discussion inevitably leads to the question of whether esoteric or tantric Buddhism is an independent strand among the many kinds of Buddhism, and if so, from what time and

¹⁸ New cults are set up at astonishing speed, see S. N. Roy, “The Evolution of a New Hindu God” in JBORS, vol. II, part I, but also <http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/Library/studies/inhemp/6appl.htm> for a note by Grierson testifying to earlier worship; or the famous case of Santoshi Maa, whose cult started with a film.

¹⁹ Cf. *Pañca-tantra*, a popular collection of narratives, nothing “tantric”.

²⁰ Cf. the *Sarva-tathāgata-tattva-saṅgraha* itself, most commonly referred to as a *sūtra* or the *sūtra*.

in what way. Most exegetes of the tradition consider that esoteric or tantric Buddhism is a special kind of Mahāyāna, differentiated from more mainstream, exoteric Mahāyāna Buddhism not by doctrine, but by its unique means, that is to say its practices:

*ekārthatve 'py asammohād bahūpāyād aduṣkarāt
tīkṣṇendriyādhikārāc ca mantraśāstraṃ viśiṣyate*²¹

“Although it has the same end, the tradition of *mantras* is superior because (i) it does not err, (ii) it has many means, (iii) it is not difficult, and (iv) because it is within the purview of the choicest individuals.”

Thought some of them were controversial, Buddhist exegetes invested not inconsiderable efforts into keeping esoteric practices within the fold.

As for esoteric Buddhism as an independent stream, the minimum requirement would be for it to offer the possibility of liberation, in other words for esoteric Buddhism to claim a soteriology of its own. This occurs only in the seventh century or so, therefore it is from this time that we can speak of a truly different kind of Buddhism, one that nevertheless maintained inseparable connections with the ground it emerged from. This is what I refer to as ‘mature’ esoteric Buddhism.

Fake Buddhism?

Another frequently voiced opinion is that the esoteric movement is nothing but Hinduism or Śaivism in Buddhist garb. It cannot be denied that the influence, both typological and genetic, of especially Śaivism was indeed great, but to suggest that this somehow compromised Buddhist values amounts to saying that one knows what “true” Buddhism is. The considered exploration of parallels (and differences), without which the study of tantric Buddhism would be considerably poorer, sheds important light on the kind and level of interaction that existed between esoteric Buddhism and other kindred schools.

Paradigm-shifts

The considerations listed above hopefully make it clear that we must be very careful with sweeping statements and only apparently comprehensive terms. Esoteric or tantric Buddhism (just like Buddhism for that matter) is a collective notion. This should not come as a surprise for a movement that blossomed for at least a millennium in its native lands and even beyond abroad.

²¹ Famous verse by Trivikrama. *Pāda d fluctuat: mantranītiḥ praśasyate*. Might be important, but it is also the case that the endings of quotations frequently change because this is typically where our memory lets us down and we tend to make up for it (I think I read this in M. L. West’s *Textual Criticism and ...*, well, that orange book).

Humble beginnings

The earliest texts that are counted by later exegetes among the esoteric revelation date, according to latest finds, from the first or second century of the Common Era.²² These at first are no more than simple spells (*dhāraṇī* or *vidyā*), which are accompanied by increasingly elaborate rites (*kriyā* or *karman*, T. *bya ba*). The aims of these spells and ritual procedures are exclusively worldly. These early texts deal for the most part with what may be called *therapeutic magic*: the curing of physical and psychological affliction, or even more often, preventing such occurrences, that is to say *prophylactic magic*. The client or target of these procedures is either the officiant himself or a single patron. However, in a very short time rituals aiming at the public sphere also appear: such would be the control of weather (typically rainmaking) or the protection of polities. The number of this type of texts is quite large, which suggests that they were quite popular and in demand: a ritual deemed successful undoubtedly resulted in growing prestige and extension of patronage. Some of the later scriptures and exegetes speak almost derogatorily about these “minor” magical rites, but their social importance was very likely immense, since such material is still to be found in the latest and purportedly most esoteric streams of revelation. Furthermore, according to historical accounts, when three of the most famous Indian esoteric masters travelled to China at different times, the first thing they were invariably asked to display at court was not a learned lecture on esoteric teachings, but rain magic.²³

²² Strauch, 40-47

Ritual technologies became more and more elaborate, which gave rise to a class of specialists, who presumably wished to keep control over access to ritual material. Among others, this was perhaps one of the guiding ideas behind introducing the initiation rite, which secured transmission in master-disciple lineages. The earliest description of an elaborate initiation rite is, somewhat surprisingly, in a fifth-century Chinese apocryphal text, but the ritual itself is undoubtedly based on an Indic model.²⁴ The ritual very strongly resembles royal consecration in its imagery and terminology²⁵, but what exactly this resemblance might have entailed is still a matter of debate.

²³ A bit more on this in Szántó, 235-240.

²⁴ Strickmann, 78-87

²⁵ Davidson, 118-131

These early texts were not at all problematic from a doctrinal viewpoint, since one of the guiding ideas of the Mahāyāna mainstream was to work for the benefit of sentient beings; the confessed aim of such rites was just that. The substances employed in ritual procedures were what by pan-Indian, brahmanical standards would have been considered pure (eg milk products, vegetarian offerings). Deities were either petitioned by making an appeal to their benevolence or gently reminded of their previous promises to stand in the service of

Buddhism.

Coming of age

The fundamental paradigm-shift was to come in the seventh century. While previous texts promised success concerning worldly goals, the new revelations starting from this period claim that followers can also accomplish the final aim of Buddhism, that is to say liberation, the state of becoming a *buddha*. The fundamental text of this period, the already mentioned *Sarva-tathāgata-tattva-saṅgraha*, goes even further and suggests that the esoteric path that opens up through initiation (*abhiṣeka*) is the **only** true way to liberation.

This claim is toned down by later exegetes, although there was a very strong consensus among them that though the esoteric path may not be the only possible route, it is certainly the quickest and most effective.

While the ritual of initiation, subsequent practice and observances became more elaborate, elements that would be difficult to harmonise with exoteric Buddhism were still relatively rare. The promise of liberation in parallel with the fulfillment of worldly aims is of paramount importance, since it is here that esoteric Buddhism truly came of age.

The promise of both liberation (*mukti*) and this-worldly enjoyments (*bhukti*), was precisely the same strategy that Śaivism owes its success to. One wonders why people did not come up with this plan earlier. Mutual exclusions are not *that* tough to beat, right Hegel?

The tone of subsequent texts is definitely one of a confident trend that sees itself as the pinnacle of Buddhist revelation. It is from this time that we may speak of mature esoteric Buddhism.

The antinomian turn

The next shift occurred around the eighth century, when the esoteric path started becoming increasingly antinomian. From this point onward, both the initiation rite and the post-initiatory psycho-physical practices start containing elements that transgress conventions of ritual purity and ethical norm. This is also reflected in the pantheons. Deities that were up to this point portrayed as static, peaceful, radiating transcendental calm are gradually (and by the tenth century almost) overtaken by counterparts that are dynamic, wrathful, and aggressive. Royal symbolism (eg jewellery worn by the deities) is overshadowed by the world of the cremation ground (here bone ornaments). The customary offerings made to the deities are complemented by impure substances such as bodily excretions, meat, and

liquor. The meditation practices often require the very close presence of a consort, and in parallel with this idea the role of female deities increases. The collective worship of initiates is occasionally orgiastic. Last but not least, it is from this point onwards that the influence of Śaivism becomes very much apparent, not only in typological parallels but on a textual level.²⁶

²⁶ Sanderson, 145-157

The rather striking parallels with Śaivism did not go unnoticed by co-religionists; in fact, in a polemical passage of a tenth-century commentary, an opponent very strongly suggests that certain elements of transgressive practice are nothing else but the mirror-image of Kaula Śaivism. The author concedes the point and states that the difference consists in the fact that Kaulas do not recognise the lack of intrinsic nature in Self and phenomena like Buddhists do, so they will get their right rewards (*ie* reincarnation in hells) for being antinomian.²⁷

²⁷ Szántó, 44-47

Antinomian esoteric Buddhism proved much more problematic than its immediate predecessor, which promised liberation through still uncontroversial means. However, it is important to note that the transgressive elements cannot be equated with hedonistic, uncontrolled, and aimless behaviour. Rather, transgression is always a calculated one with the expressed aim of creating an awareness free of dualities, *eg* pure-impure.²⁸ An initiate was ideally never a libertine; on the contrary, with initiation his ritual obligations only increased.

²⁸ Thought-provoking discussions are to be found in Wedemeyer, 105ff.

The scriptures of later esoteric Buddhism were problematic not only on account of their teachings, but also because of their idiosyncratic structures and peculiar registers of Sanskrit²⁹. The ninth and tenth centuries, in parallel with ever newer revelations, produced a veritable flurry of exegesis debating controversial aspects of the new esoteric corpus.

²⁹ For what is possibly the most extreme example, the *Catuṣpīṭha-tantra* [T. *Gdan bzhi'i rgyud*], see Szántó, 60-67

Grand unifying theories

The first two centuries of the second millennium is the golden age of esoteric Buddhism in South Asia. This period is characterised by a significant effort to summarise, standardise, and coherently justify the unruly products of the last two and a half centuries. This effort was by no means monolithic: there was no centralised religious or secular power that would provide policies for exegesis—we are looking at you, Tibetan Empire and China—and this allowed for a variety of voices with very different agendas. One general guideline, however, seems to have been to seek a harmonisation with non-esoteric Mahāyāna Buddhism and to create a coherent, inclusivistic model that would appeal to both the monastic establishments and lay patrons.

Inclusivism, a term coined and/or popularised by Paul Hacker, has long been established as one of the defining driving ideas of mediaeval Indic theological thinking. It is very different from syncretism. Instead of describing rival religions or schools as thoroughly misguided or heretical and worthy of persecution, the model seeks to arrange religious systems into a hierarchic model. At the top—no surprise here—is the given writer’s own school. Other religions/soteriologies are arranged below this as valid, but only up to a certain point. In other words, these also seek and express the same truth, but stop short at some point. Of course, this does not mean that there was constant tolerance between religions in mediaeval India, unfortunate exceptions are in abundance.³⁰

The beginning of the thirteenth century coincided with the beginning of the rather quick end of Buddhism in South Asia. The circumstances of this downfall are still debated: it was probably due to a set of causes and not exclusively attributable to the military expeditions of Muslim invaders from the West. With the all the more notable exception of Nepal, Buddhism (and thus tantric Buddhism) survived only in small pockets and all but disappeared in the next centuries. It thrived elsewhere; so much so that nowadays we identify tantric Buddhism primarily with Tibetan Buddhism.

³⁰ For a very nuanced yet accessible study, see A. Sanderson, “Tolerance, Exclusivity, Inclusivity, and Persecution in Indian Religion During the Early Mediaeval Period.” *In Honoris Causa: Essays in Honour of Aveek Sarkar*, edited with a foreword by John Makinson (Allen Lane, 2015), pp. 155–224.

The insider narrative

The very rough sketch of eras and paradigm-shifts given above is a historic one, based on the evidence modern scholarship has thus far explored, and it naturally does not correspond with how tantric Buddhist exegetes conceived of their religion. In what follows, I shall try to reconstruct with a running commentary what may be termed the insiders’ narrative, as it might have been confessed by an imaginary learned authority around or after roughly 1100 CE.

Etic designations

The two most common etic names for tantric or esoteric Buddhism are *mantra-naya* (“the mode of spells”, T. *sngags kyi tshul*) and *vajra-yāna* (“the vajra-vehicle”, T. *rdo rje’i theg pa*).

The first term, *mantra-naya* is to be taken as the counterpart of *pāramitā-naya* (“the mode of perfections”, T. *pha rol tu phyin pa’i tshul*), in the sense that on the esoteric path it is not the cultivation of the “perfections” (*pāramitā*), such as that of giving (*dāna*, T. *sbyin pa*) and so forth, that dominate, but ritual meditation based on spells (*mantra*). Of course, *mantra* here is to be taken metonymically as the most characteristic element of an initiate’s large palette of practices.

The use of *mantras*, as the very name suggests, is indeed pervasive.

Almost every ritual-meditative act is accompanied by the prescribed *mantra*, which at the very least qualifies it as truly efficacious action and not just a worldly act. However, most frequently *mantras* are conceived of as having powers much beyond this. Each deity has at least one *mantra*, from which it emerges or is summoned by. The visual image and the sonic form are frequently equated: the *mantra* is nothing but the deity, they cannot be separated.

Some examples: OM TĀRE TUTTĀRE TURE SVĀHĀ to summon the goddess Tārā; most wrathful deities emerge from the seed-syllable HŪṂ; OM ĀḤ HŪṂ for empowering body, speech, and mind; a typical spell in erotic magic is OM VAJRĀṆKUŚĀ ĀKARṢAYA HŪṂ; to summon the attendant goddess Pukkaṣī in worship, one recites OM EHY EHI BHAGAVATI VAJRAGUHYEŚVARI BAHUVIVIDHAVEŚADHĀRIṆI SARVATATHĀGATAPUṢṬE SAMAYAM ANUSMARA HANA 2 RAṆGA 2 RAṆGĀPAYA 2 PŪRAYA 2 ĀVIŚA 2 SARVADUṢṬĀN NARTTA 2 NARTTĀPAYA 2 HAḤ HA HA HA HA HŪṂ 2 PHAṬ (NB *mantras* are not translated in Tibetan).

Given their paramount importance, one would expect that there would be an abundance of passages in the literature describing or discussing how *mantras* work. However, this is not the case. There might be several explanations for this curious absence.

The first is that it is not curious at all: even the most sceptic authors would not deny the pan-Indic dictum: “the power of gems, medicinal herbs, and *mantras* is unfathomable.”³¹ In other words, *mantras* work, but the causal nexus from their deployment until the sought result is too complex to understand.

Some early scriptures, such as the *Vairocanaṅghisambodhi* (“The Enlightenment of Vairocana”, T. *Rnam par snang mdzad kyi mngon par rdzogs par byang chub pa*), seem to have endorsed the view that the power of *mantras* is intrinsic.³²

Another explanation, and this is first articulated in philosophical-epistemological works, is that *mantras* do not work because they are somehow eternally connected with the effects they give access to. Rather, their efficacy is guaranteed by the trustworthiness of the person who reveals them. If the Buddha (or a *buddha*) says that this spell will grant this result, it must come about without fail, for such a person can never be wrong.³³

Yet another view was that *mantras* (and other paraphernalia of tantric practice) are just as empty and insubstantial as any other phenomena, but they are somehow special inasmuch as they bring about a special effect, that is liberation. The simile is that of the plantain tree, the trunk of which is empty and yet it yields fruits.³⁴

The latter term, *vajra-yāna*, is part of a triad, where *śrāvaka-yāna* (“the vehicle of hearers”, T. *nyan thos kyi theg pa*) is what we nowadays identify as orthodox Buddhism (the only surviving exponent of which is the Thera-vāda) and *pāramitā-yāna* (“the vehicle of perfections”), which is synonymous with *pāramitā-naya*.

³¹ *acintyo hi mañimantrauśadhīnām prabhāvaḥ* and other similar formulations in epics, drama, mystical literature, and doubtless elsewhere. Note the close mirror in European mystical literature: *In herbis, in verbis, in lapidibus* [scil. *est Deus / sunt virtutes*].

³² Hodge, 170-172. This is dangerously close to the Vedic view, where they are thought to be eternal.

³³ See Eltschinger’s masterful study.

³⁴ So eg Bhavabhaṭṭa, see Szántó, 472



Figure 2: This is a *vajra* in its most common form. Stock photo by allocrice-tulus, image ID 11540334.

The word *vajra* (T. *rdo rje*) primarily means the emblematic implement, in effect a sign of office, of an initiate: the sceptre. This consists of a spheric handle with protruding prongs on both sides. The number of prongs is most often five (but the earlier ones have three or one, later it can also be nine), which most often coalesce again at the tip. The size of the sceptre may vary considerably.³⁵ The word has a variety of other meanings which are well exploited by our texts. One meaning is diamond, which comes to represent non-dual gnosis (*a-dvaya-jñāna*, T. *gnyis pa med pa'i shes pa*): like a diamond, it cannot be divided by anything, but itself cuts through everything. The word *vajra* most often simply serves to appropriate and/or colonise terms from other traditions, acting as if it were a trademark prefix in the sense “of the esoteric Buddhist kind”. Thus, for the Śaiva Rudra we have Vajra-rudra, the *guru* becomes *vajra-guru*, the mount of Viṣṇu Vajra-garuḍa, and so on.³⁶ The practitioner’s new name received in initiation must also contain this word ($\times$ +*vajra* for men, *vajra*+ $\times$ for women).

³⁵ Davidson, 127 and Figure 2

³⁶ Cf. Tribe, 217-219

Other emic names include: *mahā-mantra-naya*, *mantra-caryā-naya*, *mantra-mahā-yāna*, *guhya-mantra-mahā-yāna*, *mahā-vajra-yāna*, *mantra-yāna*, *agra-yāna*, *an-uttara-mahā-yāna*, *mantra-śāstra*, *vajra-mahā-yāna* (Vilāsavajra!), *bhagavac-chāsana-sāra*, *an-uttarabodhimārga*, *samyak-sambuddha-yāna*, *gambhīra-mahā-yāna*, *phala-yāna* (vs *hetu-yāna*), *mahā-rāganayadharma*.

Levels of revelation

The “mode of *mantras*” or the “*vajra*-vehicle”, so the exegetes, is not different from the exoteric Mahā-yāna in its aim and purpose, since both lead to the same: perfect enlightenment for the welfare of all sentient beings and an end to being a subject of bondage, that is to say transmigration. The only difference is that on the esoteric path the goal is reached quicker, easier, better equipped, but this path is also much more dangerous and not for everyone but the choicest individuals. To illustrate this point, it is sometimes called to mind that on the exoteric path it takes three uncountable eras to reach perfect enlightenment,³⁷ whereas on the esoteric path the same can be achieved in a single lifetime, here and now.

Of course, this does not mean that non-esoteric Buddhism is useless: the *buddhas* in their infinite compassion revealed a variety of means of achievement, so that each and every aspirant can practice a teaching that is best suited to their particular level of understanding and capability. Some of these may seem contradictory, but this is only a superficial appearance.

But even those following the esoteric path are of varying capabilities, therefore the *buddhas* revealed a variety of scriptures (*tantra*), which can be arranged into levels. There were several lists of such levels, below we shall discuss the one that became quite prevalent,

³⁷ Even according to the most conservative calculations, this means 3×10^{51} years! Not a bad deal, right?

although perhaps not dominant, in the eleventh century: *kriyā-tantra* (T. *bya ba'i rgyud*), *caryā-tantra* (T. *spyod pa'i rgyud*), *yoga-tantra* (T. *rnal 'byor gyi rgyud*), *mahā-yogatantra/yogottara* (T. *rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud*), and *yoga-niruttara-tantra/yoginī-tantra* (T. *rnal 'byor bla na med pa'i rgyud*, *rnal 'byor ma'i rgyud*).

Perhaps the most widespread doxographical model, and this is certainly true for the Tibetan tradition, was the quadripartite one: *kriyā*, *caryā*, *yoga*, and *yoginī*. The model given here is preferable for the present discussion, simply because it is more revealing.

(i) *kriyā*

At the bottom of the model are scriptures in which outer rituals (*kriyā*) dominate. This is the largest group of texts, primarily because the hundreds of *dhāraṇī* texts fall under this category. A *dhāraṇī* (or sometimes *vidyā*) is a spell of varying length, usually a mix of intelligible (eg *NAMO BUDDHĀYA*, etc. - “homage to the Buddha”, etc.) and non-referential (eg *HILI MILI SILI*) words. The spell is usually revealed in a frame story, typically a story of some crisis such as snakebite, meteorological disaster, or affliction by demons. Appeal is made to the Buddha (or a *buddha*, or some other superhuman authority), who then reveals the spell and its various ways of deployment. The crisis is solved or averted and the text closes with the praise of the spell. The frame story, a narratological classic, acts as a magical precedent: since a superhuman authority acted in such and such a way thereby overcoming or averting a crisis, a future practitioner should act in the same way and expect the same result.

Other texts of the *kriyā-tantra* class (often called *kalpa*, “ritual”) may and do contain spells, but here we witness a growth and sophistication of ritual. One of the most commonly used ritual mechanisms is to summon a deity through its spell. These deities are often brahmanical and the way their spells are revealed are framed in a conversion story, where they yield and swear fealty to a Buddhist deity of higher power. The deities in question are either petitioned or they themselves pledge to act in concordance with the will of the ritualist. To this effect, they present their spells and the rituals by which they can be summoned. The practitioner, acting on the authority of this revelation, often retires to a solitary place and propitiates the spell. The deity will appear and ask what wishes to accomplish. As of rule, in earlier texts the ritualist seeks the benevolence of the deities, but the later trend is that the deities do not have a choice but to act as instructed.

(ii) *caryā*

On the next level of revelation the outer rituals and inner meditative practices are—at least in theory—in balance. This is the so-called *caryā-tantra* class, which is the smallest with only two main texts, the *Vajra-pāṇy-abhiṣeka* (The Initiation of Vajrapāṇi, T. *Phyag na rdo rje'i dbang bskur*) and the *Vairocanābhīśambodhi* (The Enlightenment of Vairocana).³⁸ The latter has been translated into English twice, from Chinese and Tibetan respectively (the latter with a commentary, see Hodge). Apart from some citations, the original Sanskrit is still missing.

³⁸ Also see *BEB1* entry.

Since this text is one of the two most important Shingon (roughly: Japanese tantric Buddhism) scriptures, there is a large amount of scholarship in Japanese; the other chief scripture is the *Sarva-tathāgata-tattva-saṅgraha*. Most Shingon temples display the pantheons (named *Taizōkai* [Skt. *garbhadhātu*] and *Kongōkai* [Skt. *dharmadhātu*] respectively) of these two texts.

It is not entirely clear why the term *caryā* (basically “post-initiatory observance”) was chosen for this group. Several Śaiva *tantras* have a quadripartite structure: *kriyā* (ritual), *caryā* (observance), *yoga* (meditation/practice), and *jñāna* (knowledge); it is perhaps not accidental that three out of the four act as doxographical categories in Buddhist exegesis.

While in the earlier class perhaps the most popular deity is Avalokiteśvara and his various ectypes, from here onward the deity Vairocana assumes the most prominent position, not just as one of the many *buddhas*, but as the chief enlightened being, encompassing both transcendent and immanent reality.

One of the most seminal statements of the *Vairocanābhīśambodhi* is that *buddhas* can take various appearances in order to teach the doctrine as it is appropriate for a given person. This, of course, is not an entirely new idea, but the passage in question includes the deities of other religions. It states that *buddhas* can and do appear as Maheśvara (*ie* Śiva), Nārāyaṇa (*ie* Viṣṇu), and Brahmā, and that the doctrine taught in these forms is “of the same taste” (*ekarasa*, T. *ro gcig*) with the omniscience of the *buddhas*.³⁹ In other words, the text practically authorises Buddhists to colonise other religions, an allowance that was well put to use later on.

³⁹ The Sanskrit from a testimonium is edited in Tsukamoto, Matsunaga, Isoda, 515–516.

(iii) *yoga*

On the next level it is meditative practices (*yoga*) that dominate, hence the texts of this medium-sized group is *yoga-tantra*. The emblematic *yogatantra* is the aforementioned *Sarva-tathāgata-tattva-saṅgraha*.⁴⁰ Besides the already mentioned features concerning initiation and

⁴⁰ Also see *BEB1* entry.

practice, this text also contains a story of how the deity Vajrapāṇi acting on the authority of Buddha tamed the god Rudra (*ie Śiva*). This suggests rather clearly who were perceived as the main rivals. Moreover, the text already contains elements that may be considered antinomian, but these will become more dominant only later on.⁴¹ Although the name of this class would suggest that meditation is dominant, there is still great emphasis placed on the meticulous performance of external actions, such as hand gestures (*mudrā*).

Another very important text from this group is the *Mañjuśrī-nāma-saṅgīti* (The Litany of Names of Mañjuśrī, T. 'Jam dpal gyi mtshan yang dag par brjod pa). On the surface this is nothing more than a hymn of unending epithets. The tradition did not see it that way. There is early exegesis already attributing mystical meaning to the text, and there are further commentaries from the viewpoint of each successive revelation, all trying to prove that their teaching are already found here.⁴²

(iv) *mahā-yoga/yogottara*

The level of *yoga-tantras* has two, even more esoteric layers added on top, namely the “great (or special) *yoga*” (*mahā-yoga*), or “that which is superior to *yoga*” (*yogottara*), and the “*yoga* of which there is no higher” (*yoga-niruttara*), also called, because of the dominance of goddesses, the scriptures of the *yoginīs* (*yoginī-tantra*).

Although a minor problem, it is worth pointing out that the latter category is often found in secondary literature as **anuttara-yoga-tantra*, which is a false re-Sanskritisation from the precise Tibetan rendering of *yoga-niruttara-tantra* (Tib. *rnal 'byor bla na med pa'i rgyud*).

In the first group, the most important text is the *Guhya-samāja* (roughly: The Congress of Secrets, T. *Gsang 'dus*).⁴³ This is perhaps the earliest text in which deities are depicted in sexual embrace (the other candidate would be another text from the same group, the *Māyā-jāla*, The Net of Illusion, T. *Sgyu 'phrul dra ba*). The rite of initiation is certainly taught to include intercourse; moreover, sexual fluids, along with other body-products are treated as sacraments.⁴⁴

A fitting testimony to the arcane diction of text is the fact that there were several exegetical schools based on it, disagreeing even in the matter of who the chief deity is and how many attendants he is surrounded by.⁴⁵

One of the most important statements of this text concerns an idea that has already been intimated before, namely that the constituents (*skandha*, T. *phung po*) of the person in their pure form are deities.

pañca skandhāḥ samāsena pañca buddhāḥ prakīrtitāḥ 17.50ab

⁴¹ Sanderson, 132-140



Mudras of the Vajradhatumandala, hand gestures. Nepal, 17th c.

Figure 3: Schøyen Collection, MS 2175. By far the most popular Nepalese Buddhist illuminated manuscript, ultimately goes back to the STTS.

⁴² Also see BEB1 entry.

⁴³ Also see BEB1 entry.

⁴⁴ Sanderson, 141-145; Tribe, 210-213

⁴⁵ A full English translation of the *Guhya-samāja* is available in Fremantle (26-172). On the remarkable founding figure of the older of the two most popular exegetical schools, Jñāna-pāda/Buddha-jñāna-pāda (T. *Ye shes zhab*), possibly once royal officiant at the Pāla court, see Davidson (309-316, with several misunderstandings) and Sanderson (93). We will return to this fascinating master later.

This idea either resulted in or stemmed from a rather radical reevaluation of the human body, which was not viewed anymore as a locus of impermanence, impurity, and imperfection, but of a divine nature, the best available means towards liberation. Naturally, from this time onwards we have more and more passages condemning ascetic practices and prescribing a controlled enjoyment of sense objects. This idea is already present in the *yoga-tantras*, but it is on this level that it becomes a central doctrine.

Halfway in-between the *yoga-tantra* and the *yoginī-tantra* level is the so-called proto-*yoginī-tantra* with the unwieldy title *Sarva-buddha-samāyoga-ḍākinī-jāla-śamvara* (The Union with All Buddhas, the Highest Bliss That is the Illusion of Ḍākinīs, T. *Sangs rgyas thams cad dang mnyam par sbyor ba mkha' 'gro sgyu ma bde ba'i mchog*) otherwise simply known as the *Śamvara* (or its eastern orthographic variant, the *Samvara*, T. *bde mchog* or *sdom pa*).⁴⁶

In older Buddhist texts *ḍākinīs* (T. *mkha' 'gro ma*) figure as undesirable supernatural female beings, but from this point onwards they are goddesses, the synonym of *yoginī* (T. *rnal 'byor ma*).

The title can be and is interpreted in various ways.⁴⁷ Much of the concerns of the *yoga-tantras* are still reflected here, such as detailed descriptions of elaborate hand-gestures (*mudrā*, T. *phyag rgya*). Among the most important innovations of the text are the appearance of the wrathful deity Heruka, which adopts the imagery of the cremation ground, and the introduction of orgiastic group worship called *gaṇa-cakra* or *gaṇa-maṇḍala* (T. *tshogs 'khor*).⁴⁸ Both these elements, the cremation ground symbolism and group worship, are borrowings from Śaivism.⁴⁹

(v) *yoga-niruttara-tantra*/*yoginī-tantra*

The last and supposedly supreme level of revelation is that of the *yoginī-tantras*. Here the symbolism of the cremation ground comes to full bloom, as do antinomian elements. The registers of Sanskrit employed on this level vary, some of them are nearly incomprehensible without the aid of commentaries.⁵⁰

The two most important scriptures of this group are the ninth-century *Herukābhidhāna* (The Discourse of Heruka, T. more commonly *Bde mchog nyung gu*, i.e. *Laghuśamvara*)⁵¹

This text has now been translated into English in full in Gray (155-383), who also published a critical edition recently. Another title of the text is *Laghu-śamvara* (The Short [Scripture] of Śamvara). The prestige of the scripture is much greater than the importance of its contents. Most teachings related to this cycle are revealed or elaborated upon

⁴⁶ A Sanskrit manuscript of this *tantra* has been discovered relatively recently (summer of 2013 by Prof. Arlo Griffiths); an edition and study is currently under preparation by me. A partial edition in *Dhīl* 58.

⁴⁷ For some of these see Tribe (215-216)

⁴⁸ For a description see Davidson, 318-322. We will return to this crucial celebration of sectarian identity.

⁴⁹ Sanderson, 145-156

⁵⁰ Szántó, 198-474

⁵¹ Also see *BEB1* entry.

in so-called continuation tantras (*uttara-tantra*) among which the most important are: the *Herukābhyudaya* (The Glory of Heruka), the *Vajra-dāka* (The Vajra-Imp), the *Abhidhānottara* (The Continuation to the Discourse), the *Yoginī-saṅcāra* (The Course of Yoginīs), the *Catur-yoginī-samputa* (The Union of Four Yoginīs), the *Samputodbhava* (The One Born from the Union), the *Samvarodaya* (The Rise of Samvara), and the *Ḍākārṇava* (The Sea of [Vajra-]Imps). The latter two can be suspected to be of Nepalese origin. Except for the first, all are extant in the original. The *Samputodbhava* is sometimes described as “shared”, that is to say it is a continuation *tantra* to more than one cycle.

and the somewhat later *Hevajra-tantra* (The Scripture of Hevajra, *Kye'i rdo rje'i rgyud*).⁵²

After Snellgrove's pioneering edition, the most up to date translation is that of Farrow & Menon, but much work remains to be done on this fundamental scripture.⁵³ The *Hevajra* also has its continuation *tantras*, among which the *Ḍākinī-vajra-pañjara* (The Vajra-cage of Ḍākinīs) and the *Mahā-mudrā-tilaka* (A Drop of the Great Seal) are especially important. The first is known to have survived in the original in a for the time being inaccessible witness, two Sanskrit commentaries are extant and available for study; the second survives in a single manuscript, which has hardly received any attention.

A sizeable part of the *Herukābhidhāna*, a clumsily edited scripture, can be shown to have Śaiva textual antecedents.⁵⁴ The text introduces the cult of the deity Śamvara or Śamvara, his consort, Vajra-vārāhī (Vajra-Sow, T. *Rdo rje phag mo*), and their male and female attendants arranged in a *maṇḍala* of three circuits. The attendants preside over both external sacred pilgrimage places (*pīṭha* [T. *gdan*] etc.) and equated elements of the practitioner's body. The text also teaches a wide variety of spells and practices to gain magical powers.

The *Hevajra-tantra* is the result of much more careful composition. Here the main deity is the eponymous He-vajra in union with his consort, Nairātmyā (T. *Bdag med ma*). Elements of the cult are skillfully blended with Mahā-yāna philosophical concepts, but at the same time an array of new terms and teachings are also revealed.

Perhaps the most important among these is the teaching of four kinds of bliss (*ānanda*, T. *bde ba*), which are first experienced by the practitioner in four moments (*kṣaṇa*) during one of the higher initiation rites, where he is to have intercourse with a woman termed “wisdom” (*prajñā*, T. *shes rab*) or “seal” (*mudrā*, T. *phyag rgya*). These act as a kind of foretaste of what he is to cultivate in post-initiatory meditation. The culmination is a spontaneous, liberated state of consciousness termed in a variety of ways: “the innate” (*saha-ja*, T. *lhan cig skyes pa*), “great/special bliss” (*mahā-sukha*, T. *bde ba chen po*), or “great seal” (*mahā-mudrā*, T. *phyag rgya chen po*). Although some earlier texts already allude to a primitive form of a concept sometimes

⁵² Also see *BEB1* entry.

⁵³ H. Isaacson, forthcoming

⁵⁴ Sanderson, 186-220



Figure 4: Tangut/Xixia depiction of Samvara with consort and attendants kept at the Hermitage. We have come far from Gandhāra and Mathurā.

termed “the subtle body”, it is the model introduced by the *Hevajra* that became the most popular. According to this teaching there are tubes/veins (*nāḍī*, T. *rtsa*) and discuses/nexuses (*cakra*, T. *’khor lo*) located in the body. These are responsible for carrying the vital energies and their function also defines states of consciousness. An advanced practitioner must gain mastery over this structure. How this model was thought to have functioned is still only poorly explored by modern scholarship.

These two texts and their satellites were dominant from *ca.* 900 CE onwards. The cult of Vārāhī even reached a semi-autonomous state and was very able to absorb various goddess cults.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ See E. English’s outstanding monograph.

(v+i) *Kālacakra*

The first half of the eleventh century witnessed the emergence of yet another cult, which consciously strove to summarise in novel ways the teachings of the previous ages in one scripture that would surpass all. This is the famous *Kāla-cakra* (The Wheel of Time, T. *Dus kyī ’khor lo*).

There are quite a few studies dealing with this scripture and its literature. A very informative monograph is that of Wallace, who has since published translations of selected chapters of the *Kāla-cakra* together with its grand commentary, the *Vimala-prabhā* (Stainless Light).

The text is noteworthy in many respects, but two features merit special attention.

Not entirely typical of an Indic scripture, it shows keen awareness of historical events. Naturally, these are presented as a prophesy, one could even call it eschatology, uttered by the Buddha. The prophesy starts with “foretelling” the appearance of the prophet Madhumati (Muhammad), the rise of Islam in the realm of Makha (Mecca), the end of days when the king of a mythical land called Śambhala (or Sambhala) shall gain victory in an epic battle over what the text calls “barbarians”, and the establishment a new golden age thereafter. This is basically a creative borrowing of the myth of Viṣṇu’s last *avatāra*.

The other feature also reflects socio-historical concerns: the scripture and its commentators strongly condemn lay tantric masters and promote their monastic counterparts. I think that this is a trace of intense rivalry between these two groups immediately before and after the turn of the millennium. The monastic community were thoroughly justified to view the rise of antinomian tantric Buddhism with some concern. For now they were facing the paradoxical situation that as custodians of Buddhism they could not access without transgressing monastic vows what was increasingly perceived as

the highest and most efficacious form of the religion. Receiving the higher initiations at least from the ninth century onwards involved intercourse, which naturally meant breaking the vow of celibacy.⁵⁶ However, in theory initiation was open to all four social categories of Buddhism: laymen and laywomen, monks and nuns. Seemingly the most commonly preferred solution was that monastic persons were only to visualize elements incompatible with the Rules (*vinaya*, T. 'dul ba), but there were also other solutions offered by creative exegesis. Whether this means that early mature esoteric Buddhism was a lay movement, which was only gradually absorbed into the monastic establishment, is an issue that still awaits thorough investigation.

Short guide to literary expressions

Proponents of esoteric Buddhism in South Asia never closed their canon in the way their Chinese and Tibetan spiritual descendants did. However, there are several signs to show, including polemic writings, that not everybody accepted each revelation or level of revelation without some objection. There were some Buddhists who condemned the esoteric path as heresy,⁵⁷ others were willing to accept only certain revelations as valid,⁵⁸ and there was also a minority who would claim that although the esoteric path is valid, in our day and age there are no suitable aspirants to practice it.⁵⁹

From the brief survey of tantric Buddhist scriptures above it may seem that these were the guiding texts of the religion. In fact, this is not entirely so. *For religions very rarely follow direct revelation; it is exegesis that truly defines doctrine and practice.* Scriptures very quickly tended to slip in the background once practical manuals (truly or supposedly) based on that particular scripture appeared. In other words, after some time the role of scriptures was to simply exist, to serve as authoritative basis for what is otherwise followed from practical prescriptive manuals. Besides the already mentioned scriptures, the rest of tantric Buddhist literature can be roughly grouped in the following categories: exegesis, ritual manuals, essays, and miscellaneous.

Exegesis mainly means commentaries on *tantras*, but there are also commentaries on works considered more important than the average, such as prestigious ritual manuals. Although a thorough investigation has not yet been carried out, it can be said with assurance that the Buddhist tantric exegetes produced a much greater number of commentaries than other tantric traditions. These vary from simple glosses on more difficult points of a text to voluminous word-for-word explanations, sometimes containing digressions, polemical or otherwise. The interpretations often greatly vary, which points to a

⁵⁶ For a short and lucid survey of problems concerning the higher initiations see Isaacson. For a synopsis of contents of a more or less typical initiation manual see Szántó (123-147). Yet more on the initiation ceremony can be found in Snellgrove (213-270), Tribe (231-235). We will come back to this, too.

⁵⁷ Sanderson, 240

⁵⁸ Szántó, 45-47

⁵⁹ Szántó, forthcoming on *Dharmendra and his disciple and apologist *Coyaga Udbhaṭa. We will discuss them later, they have fascinating things to say.

lively environment where multiple views could thrive and compete. Tantric hermeneutics is again a topic that has been explored only superficially.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Steinkellner

Ritual manuals make up the bulk of tantric Buddhist literature. This often neglected corpus allows us to see how practices were performed, as scriptures are, for the most part, extremely vague about actual step-by-step practice. There is a debate whether these manuals were descriptive or prescriptive, in other words whether they were codifying already existing practice or setting out an ideal framework, which may not have been followed at all. However, the very fact that these manuals are extant seems to suggest that they were considered important at least for the copyist or his patron. One could argue that they might have been copied for merit, which is indeed a widespread activity among Buddhists, but since much greater merit could be accrued from copying scripture, it can be suspected that these were used for practical purposes and were not the mere result of pious activity. Such texts can vary greatly in length and sophistication. Some consist of a mere few lines with only the strictest essentials, but there are also grand compendia dealing with everything from the consecration (*pratiṣṭhā*, T. *rab gnas*) of civic structures through initiation to funerary rites (*antyeṣṭi*). By far the most common among these texts are so-called *sādhana*s (T. *sgrub thabs*), which describe the post-initiatory practice of visualising a deity. Here too the level of sophistication varies: *eg* a deity may be accompanied by a number of attendants and there may be special practices associated with it.

What for lack of a better word I call essays (*prakaraṇa*, T. *rab tu byed pa*) are a small but rather fascinating group of texts exploring various issues of the esoteric lore, including doxography, polemics on a wide range of topics such as initiation, rules governing the life of initiates, finer points of the doctrine, the compatibility of exoteric and esoteric Buddhism, or reasonings in defence of the esoteric path.

One rather special group among miscellanea consists of songs attributed to various *siddhas* (T. *grub thob*) mostly in a middle Indic language close to ancient East Indian vernaculars.⁶¹ Understanding these songs is difficult not only because of their language, but also because of their sometimes quite idiosyncratic symbolism. The most commonly emphasised theme is giving up dichotomous conceptualization and dwelling in a spontaneous, enlightened state. All intellectual and practical efforts are criticised and ridiculed, sometimes in a very funny way.

⁶¹ For one such collection, see the listed monograph by Kværne.

Technologies of tantric practice

Whichever form of practice or level of revelation one may deem most suitable, one who desires to follow the esoteric path must without fail undergo the initiation ritual (*abhiṣeka*) and for that one must petition a qualified master (*guru* or *ācārya*). Without initiation, we are told, all efforts of the practitioner are not only useless but dangerous. The master can of course refuse granting entry into the esoteric realm. Should he consider the petitioner suitable, he will grant him initiation, the defining moment of which is to lead the candidate (*śiṣya*) in front of a *maṇḍala* drawn from coloured powders,⁶² a schematic representation of a particular set of deities.⁶³ The initiate must swear allegiance to his master, indeed, he must look upon him as the embodiment of a *buddha* and serve him diligently.⁶⁴ After the ritual, the initiate becomes part of an elite group with its own specific rules and etiquette. He is commanded to keep all that he learns and practices confidential. Furthermore, he is bound by oaths (*samvara*, T. *sdom pa*) and pledges (*samaya*, T. *dam tshig*). Breaking these is a capital sin and results in immediate downfall into the deepest hells if the necessary expiation is not performed.⁶⁵

The descriptions of the ritual of initiation vary greatly from author to author. After a series of preliminaries related to the building of the *maṇḍala* of coloured powders, the candidate is blindfolded and led in front of the structure. There he is put into a state of possession and is made to cast a flower to prognosticate his affinity with a particular deity. After the blindfold is removed, the candidate is led around the *maṇḍala* and is, as it were, introduced to the deities. Thereafter he receives a set of initiations called “water” (*udaka*, T. *chu*), “tiara” (*mukuṭa*, T. *cod pan*), “sceptre” (*vajra*), “bell” (*ghaṇṭā*, T. *dril bu*), and “name” (*nāma*, T. *ming*). The initiate is sprinkled with water, receives a tiara and the two most important implements of his practice (the sceptre and the bell) and, to signify his change of identity, is given a new name. If he wishes to eventually become an officiant able to grant initiation himself, he is also given the master consecration (*ācārya*). The ritual concludes with a series of ancillary rites, including the destruction of the *maṇḍala*. This set roughly corresponds with the level of the *yoga-tantras*. In the later, more antinomian traditions, next comes the so-called “secret” (*guhya*, T. *gsang ba*) initiation. Here the officiant copulates with a consort and the (again blindfolded) initiand is made to consume the resulting sexual fluids. The next initiation, “coming to know wisdom” (*prajñā-jñāna*, T. *shes rab ye shes*) mirrors the above: here it is the initiand who has intercourse with the same (or another) consort (called *prajñā*, hence the name). The last initiation is simply called “the fourth” (*caturtha*, T. *bzhi pa*). There was

⁶² This is what is usually referred to as ‘sand *maṇḍala*’

⁶³ Tribe, 226-229 and 231-235; Snellgrove, 198-213

⁶⁴ Lévi, 259-263

⁶⁵ Lévi, 266-268; Davidson, 322-327

great disagreement as to its contents (a work from the early eleventh century describes no less than seventeen competing views) and some authorities even questioned whether it has any scriptural basis.

After the ritual, the initiate (now a *yogin* [T. *rnal 'byor pa*] or *mantrin* [T. *sngags pa*] or *sādhaka* [T. *sgrub pa po*]) has both the right and the duty (both meanings are conveyed by the word *adhikāra*, T. *dbang*) to practice what he (more rarely: she) had learnt. In the preliminary stage he must propitiate the spell or spells (*mantra*) conveyed to him in order to master their power. This ritual is called the “preliminary service” (*pūrva-sevā*, T. *sngon 'gro*), which most often consists of reciting (*japa*, T. *bzlas pa*) a particular spell a given number of times.⁶⁶ He is also bound to meditate on and worship the deity or deities of the cult he has become an initiate of several times a day.⁶⁷ This consists of often rather complicated visualisation (*bhāvanā*): in the less esoteric systems the practitioner treats the deity as a high-ranking guest, whereas in more esoteric practice he seeks identity with the deity, an identity that he is frequently enjoined to maintain even outside meditation sessions. This practice (usually termed *sādhana*, T. *sgrub thabs*) aims at either obtaining a deity’s powers or, by virtue of identification in the later esoteric systems, partaking in them.⁶⁸

Owing to diligent practice the initiate can also gain supernatural powers (*siddhi*, T. *grub pa*) or can become able to cause supernatural effects through various rituals. These he can put into his own service or that of others. The powers and effects in question are not always benign. A whole plethora of rituals deal with magical murder (*māraṇa*, T. *bsad pa*), paralysing (*stambhana*, T. *rengs pa*), attracting (*ākaraṇa*, T. *dgug pa*), subjugation (*vaśya*, T. *dbang du byed pa*) and others, which could be described as aggressive magic. Some exegetes are quick to point out that these can be used only in exceptional circumstances, for example in order to protect the Buddhist creed and its followers. Others, however, simply comment on passages describing aggressive rites in a matter of fact way, focusing on ritual minutiae and completely overlooking the ethical implications.

In due course of time, an initiate can himself become a master and give initiation to others. Ideally a *yogin* or *mantrin* is to become an “accomplished one” (*siddha*, T. *grub thob*), a figure better known than understood.⁶⁹ When his lifetime draws to a close, he may choose to prolong it by performing a rite called “cheating death” (*mṛtyu-vañcana*, T. *'chi bslu*), or he can prepare for the controlled egress of consciousness from the body (*utkrānti*, T. *'pho ba*).⁷⁰

Another “technology” of tantric practice is the process of homologising elements of ritual with concepts known from earlier forms of Buddhism. This process is known as *viśuddhi* (T. *rnam par dag pa*).⁷¹ Although it is not the most precise description, for practical

⁶⁶ Eg the *Hevajra* prescribes 100,000 for the main deity-pair and 10,000 each for the attendants.

⁶⁷ At the junctures: before daybreak, noon, sundown, midnight.

⁶⁸ Tribe, 229-231

⁶⁹ Davidson, 169-335

⁷⁰ Szántó, 208-222 & 455-468

⁷¹ Sfera, 85, 94

purposes one may say that elements of the ritual (beginning from the number of prongs on a *vajra*-sceptre to the colour of deities) all “symbolise” something, usually a set of terms, in Mahā-yāna or Abhidharmic thought. For example, the four sides of the *maṇḍala* may correspond to the Four Truths of the Noble One[s] (*ārya-satyāni*), the five *tathāgatas* to the five aggregates making up the person (*skandha*), and so on. To say that these are “symbols” is a little bit off mark: in actual fact, we are told, from a “pure” viewpoint the five *tathāgatas* *are* the five aggregates. The purpose of this idea was to create a way in which the tantric initiate could, in a concentratedly effective manner, quickly practice what in standard Mahā-yāna would have taken a very long time. For example, the thirty-seven principles in aid of enlightenment could be almost instantaneously achieved by identification with the thirty-seven deities populating the *maṇḍala* of Śamvara/Samvara. However, the use of *viśuddhi* stretches beyond this: it served as a convenient tool to fill elements inherited from outside (mainly Śaivism) with Buddhist meaning. For understandable reasons this is never stated, but it is a telltale sign that such homologies are sometimes prompted by nothing else but a numerical correspondence. Thus, the four sides of the *maṇḍala* may correspond to the Four Truths, but they can also correspond to other sets of four in other texts.

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